

THE USE OF SPACE IN FLATS, THE CHARACTER AND THE ARRANGEMENT OF OBJECTS AS INDICATORS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Katalin S. NAGY

Department of Sociology
Technical University of Budapest
H-1111 Budapest, Hungary
email:szocio@szocio.tgi.bme.hu
Fax: +36 1 166 6808
Phone : +36 1 161 3232

Received: March 31, 1994

Abstract

On the basis of the realized analysis we came to the result that social and cultural differences could be stated first of all by the use of space in flats and by the character and the way of arrangement of furniture.

Keywords: cultural anthropology, sociology of culture.

In 1972-1978 we made a research in Budapest and two counties of Hungary. We analysed flats from the point of view of the use of space and the character and the way of arrangement of the furniture. On the basis of these criteria we distinguished basic flat types being in connection with the social rank of the inhabitants.

In 1978, when Zsuzsa Ferge examined our photos taken in several dozen of flat interiors, she asked the questions: How is it possible to determine in all probability to which social stratum or group people and families living in these flats belong? On the basis of the realized analysis we came to the result that *social and cultural differences could be stated first of all by the use of space in flats and by the character and the way of arrangement of furniture*. The size and the comfort degree of the flats are not so informative as the above mentioned phenomena.

The flats examined in counties Zala, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén and in Budapest can be characterized by the same statistical truths that were discovered by Mrs. Hoffman's researches on the living conditions or E. Hankiss' researches on the quality of life. (The researches were based on questionnaires presented to a sample consisting of 2500 and 1500 persons.)

(Some examples: in Budapest one third of the inhabitants in the suburbs are workers and only 4% of them are intellectuals, 44% of the inhabitants of the external housing estate belts are workers and 10% are

intellectuals, 12% of the inhabitants of the green belts are workers and 27% of them are intellectuals.)

The number of rooms per head is the highest among the intellectuals: 100 intellectual families have 275-308 rooms, 100 employee families have 262-284 rooms and 100 cooperative peasant families have 228-279 rooms according to Mrs. Hoffmann. The comfort degree and infrastructure of the intellectuals' flats are better than in the other strata. According to the data of the KSH¹ 21.7% of leaders and intellectuals, 25% of other brain workers, 44.6% of unskilled workers and 40.3% of agricultural manual workers live in nonconvenient flats (non-convenient flats are the ones where more than two persons share one room or there is a room shared by two different generations). 71.3% of intellectuals live in flats of convenient size and quality of comfort, and this proportion is only 14.2% in the case of agricultural manual workers. The density of habitation in the three-member families of 0.67 room per head is generally getting worse as the family is growing.

Still we can guess the social and cultural situation of the inhabitants of the flat from the set of furniture and the mode of habitation. We chose 100 flats of Miskolc and Zalaegerszeg, 100 flats of Sárospatak and Nagykanizsa and 100 flats of Telkibánya and Galambok (two-room flats) and 100 flats of Budapest and Leninváros (housing estate flats with two rooms) — in case of necessity we took down additional data. The density of habitation in these flats was average or about it. In 1971, when the idea of this research emerged for the first time, 45.1% of all the flats had one room and 11% of them had 3 or more rooms. In 1978, at the end of the research — according to the data of KSH — 47.6% of the flats had two rooms, 18.9% of them had three or more rooms, 33.5% of them had one room. In our sample 49% of the flats had two rooms, 16% had three or more rooms and 33.5% had one room. The tendency is clear: the proportion of the single-room flats is considerably decreasing, the proportion of the flats with three or more rooms is on essential increase and the proportion of two-room flats is also increasing. In the first step we classified the flats into categories of furnishing mode on the basis of the photos taken in the chosen flats. We considered not only the complex indicator of home culture, but also all the indicators and indices of the research. Then two kinds of content analysis were made aiming at the use of space, as well as character and way of arrangement of the furniture in the flats. Afterwards, we looked up the data concerning the qualification of the family head and the wife directing the furnishing. We were surprised by the coincidence: *the proper place in*

¹KSH — National Office of Statistics

society could be determined on the basis of the visual content analysis in great probability (the coincidence was 84%).

In the analysis of the use of space the following indicators were included: proportion of furnished and non-furnished areas, size, direction and organisation of the space for coming and going, the ground-plan of the living room, modifications on the given architectural space structure and on the places of the windows and doors, the space organizing role of the modifications, connection and separation of functional areas. Out of the areas for satisfying biological and cultural needs, we analysed the following ones: eating place for regular home activity aimed at additional income and place for watching tv. The arrangement of furniture on the given area is in close connection with these activities. Our analysis on the basis of the ground-plans proves that — *in contradiction to public beliefs* — *the size of the available basic area affects home furnishing, mode of habitation, and formation of space to a less extent than the object group organizing habits and the patterns of satisfying needs and functions.* Though we compared interiors of flats with two rooms, the size of the basic areas largely varied: from 47 m² in the housing estate flats to 84 m² in the family houses. This important difference didn't manifest either in the use of space or in the dominant elements of the mode furnishing.

Besides the use of space and mode of furnishing, an other significant factor of cultural differences is the character of the furniture. With the above mentioned two standpoints an objective indicator can be connected. The definition of the character of the furniture — we opened inventories for the information in connection with it — is not so unambiguous. By 'character' we didn't mean style, type, historical category, technological, make, social and technical parameters. In the term 'character' we contracted condition, substance, material and age. Besides, we made an additional analysis containing all the three standpoints: by the help of five groups with three subgroups within each we defined the degree of orderliness (well-ordered — disordered), that of clearness (clearly arranged — confused) and that of symmetry (symmetrical — asymmetrical).

In view of these factors, the half of the examined families living in different settlements and different types of houses with the same number of rooms and similar density of living can be *classified in three types and nine subdivisions on the basis of use of space and mode of furniture arrangement and character of furniture.* (We categorized the half of the examined families because 49% of the intensively examined flats had two rooms.) *The criteria of the classification are the similarity of using space and furniture. The use of space, the mode of arrangement and the character of the furniture as cultural attributions mean special mode of subsistence, living, style and mode of living.* Max Weber says that the status groups and the

consuming groups having similar cultural attributions realize similar living style and consumption habits. From the above described analysis of the flat interiors the same conclusions can be drawn: *people furnishing their houses in similar style belong to the same cultural stratum*. The differences in living style and conduct manifested in the differences in the mode of use of flats, use of space, arrangement and character of furniture hide cultural inequalities. I suppose that the categories classified by the flat interiors and the three cultural attributions chosen form also cultural strata, as groups having similar living style and conduct.

After having analysed 400 two-room flats having about average density of living in Miskolc, Zalaegerszeg, Sáropatak, Nagykanizsa, Telkibánya, Galambok, Budapest and Leninváros (only housing estate flats in the two latter cities), on the basis of three standpoints — living space, arrangement of objects and character of furniture — distinct groups were formed, as presented in types II-IV below, altogether 9 subdivisions. Then we re-analysed all the 1533 flats illustrated by photos and situation sketches, and it appeared that all the flats could be classified into types II-IV, irrespective of the number of rooms and density of living. We only have to make two supplementary statements concerning those living under much better and much worse conditions than the average. Two thirds of the examined population have the way of habitation and furnishing that can be called average way of habitation and furnishing. This proportion corresponds with the data of population census by KSH, research on housing conditions by Mrs. Hoffmann and research on quality of life by E. Hankiss. General way of habitation includes general or approximately general density of living and contentment with living environment, number of rooms, and furniture. There is a minority suffering from a shortage in these factors and another part having an abundance of them. 21% of the examined flats can be characterized by *defective way of habitation and adequate conduct* (see type I) and 14% of the examined flats are characterized by *abundant way of habitation and adequate conduct* (see type V). The majority — 65% — *has a general way of habitations* (see types II-IV). We came to the same conclusion on the basis of the complex home culture indicator, too.

According to the character of the three cultural attributions — living space, arrangement of objects and nature of furniture — the following degrees of cultural supply are distinguishable: (the main types are divided into subdivisions).

I. The stratum deprived of cultural goods, oriented to subsistence, suffering from shortage in objects

1. Those living under very bad conditions — satisfaction of biological needs is very defective.
2. Those living under very bad conditions — satisfaction of biological needs is defective 21%.
3. Those living under bad conditions — satisfaction of biological needs is sufficient.

II. The stratum supplied with cultural goods at low level, oriented to self-reproduction, living from day to day

1. Those living under bad conditions, abandoning objects — few objects
2. Those living under medium conditions, keeping objects — shortage in objects ceases 32%.
3. Those living under medium conditions, oriented to object possession — beginning of object accumulation

III. The stratum supplied with cultural goods at medium level, oriented to consumption and object acquisition.

1. Those living under medium conditions — object accumulation, appearance of prestige objects
2. Those living under medium conditions — object cramming, flat interior oriented to prestige 47%
3. Those living under good conditions — object abundance, flat interior and space organized on the basis of prestige principles

IV. The stratum fairly supplied with cultural goods, oriented to recreation, object preservation

1. Those living under good conditions — saturation with objects, flat interior as status symbol
2. Those living under good conditions — subordination of objects, orientation to comfort 65%
3. Those living under good conditions — selection of objects, dominance of agreeableness

*V. The stratum highly supplied with cultural goods,
oriented to self-realization*

1. Those living under very good conditions — nonseries objects, flat interior having representation as main purpose
2. Those living under very good conditions — nonseries objects, flat interior having communication as main purpose 14%
3. Those living under very good conditions — nonseries objects, flat interior having creativity as a main purpose

When discussing the different types and subdivisions, I omit to publish analytical web, complicated indicators, complex indexes, matrixes and statistical repartitions and I relate the consequences drawn from them. Differences between the three subdivisions are considerable. Within the type the distances between the subdivisions — just like the stratum deprived of cultural goods — are larger than the distances between the subdivisions of the types II, III and IV.

At first subdivision, the flat interior having representation as main purpose, is nearer to the third subdivision of type III and to the first subdivision of type IV than to the other two subdivisions of its own type, in spite of the fact that the very good conditions, the individually designed flat interior and world of objects, the object choice attitude and the orientation of self-realization definitely segregate it from those and attach it to its own type. This subdivision 'is not aware but is acting', people belonging to it make selections, create their own environment often by involving external help: interior designers and other experts. They have power or money — often both — they know what they want and if they have only an internal push but no ability to realize it themselves, then power and money are used in order to create the environment they consider to be worthy of themselves and their standing. People living in flat interiors belonging to this subdivision are 'externally directed' by the term of Riesmann, their aspirations are not interiorized yet. Consequently, the essence of the living-room and of the world of objects is representation.

In the second subdivision, representation is subordinated to communication. Those who live here, just like those belonging to the third subdivision, are 'directed internally' and non-conformists, they preserve and disregard traditions, they are free of social conventions and they create new conventions. It is in the first subdivision that the creations of the second and third subdivisions become conventions. The nonconformity of these two latter strata appears as conformity with them. Subdivision having communication and creativity as main purposes create new, unusual and strange things. Subdivision having representation as main purpose

converts them into schemes and habits by transforming and making them more gentle and social. They make these things acceptable for the masses and mediate them to the others. It is not by chance that people living in flat interiors having representation as main purpose are dictators of fashion in the object culture and home culture: they are mediators between the stratum highly supplied with cultural goods, selecting objects and aiming at self-realization and the other strata. They are ones who want to be different from the others most of all and it urges them to assimilate — at least by externals — with those from whom the most innovation, peculiarities and ideas can be expected.

At the same time they have power, money and possibilities of manipulation. So they considerably influence public taste, they have an affect on groups having intention to become like them, most of all on the largest masses, that is on the stratum supplied with cultural goods at medium level and — within them — mainly on those living in flat interior organized on the basis of prestige principles (among Hungarian flat interiors this type is dominant, most flat interiors are supplied with cultural goods at medium level, oriented to prestige, and people live in them under medium or good conditions).